

Friendship Heights TMD Advisory Committee Meeting

Summary – Meeting of December 8, 2008

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Voting Members Present

April Birnbaum	Lerch, Early and Brewer, Representing New England Development
Leonard Grant	Friendship Heights Village Council
Bill McCloskey	Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights
William P. Farley	Town of Somerset
David Glass	Chevy Chase Village Board of Managers
Mary Herman	Polinger Shannon and Luchs (Employer of greater than 50)
N. Leslie Olson	Chevy Chase Land Company
Carlean Russell	Saks Fifth Avenue (Employer of greater than 50)
Robert Schwarzbart (Chair)	Friendship Heights Village Council
R. Mallory Starr	Somerset House Management Association
David Viertels	EagleBank (Employer of fewer than 50)
Kenneth Williams	GEICO

Non-Voting Members Present

Sandra L. Brecher	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services
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TMD Staff Present

Jim Carlson	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services
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Absent

Chief Roy Gordon	Chevy Chase Village Police
Capt. Russell Hamill	Montgomery County Police
Charles Kines	M-NCPPC
Gregory Knoop	Oudens Knoop Knoop + Sachs Architects (Employer of fewer than 50)
Jessica Moore	The JBG Companies

Guests

Melanie Folstad	Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Assn., Co-President
Tiffany Gee	Chevy Chase Land Company
Lt. Thomas Jacocks	Montgomery County Police (for Capt. Russell Hamill)
Bob Joiner	The Agenda News
Julian Mansfield	Village of Friendship Heights
Alvin Morris	Friendship Heights Village Council
Alfred Muller	Friendship Heights
Steve Robins	Lerch, Early and Brewer
Jeffrey Slavin	Mayor – Town of Somerset
Barbara Tauben	Friendship Heights Village Civic Assn., President

Items 1,2,3 – Introductions, Review Approval of October minutes, Chair’s Comments. Members and guests introduced themselves.

The minutes from the November meeting were approved, with the following changes: **April Birnbaum** noted that on page 1, Item 4 – should be a 20,000 sq. ft. community center, not 40,000 sq. ft.; change ‘mixed use facility’ to ‘mixed use development’. Page 2, second paragraph – change parking garage capacity to approximately 1,700 vehicles; Page 2, third paragraph – change ‘drawing distributed to group’ to ‘displayed to group.’ **Ms. Birnbaum** said she did not recall saying she ‘confirmed’ that there was to be another lane of traffic along Wisconsin Avenue

to cut into the existing sidewalk. **Jim Carlson** said this may have been in connection with a later presentation by **Robert Gonzales**, Montgomery County engineer; this phrase can be removed from the minutes.

David Glass stated he attended the October meeting, but was marked as absent. Correction noted.

Bill McCloskey asked that any reference to specific dates and numbers be noted in the minutes. For example, Mr. McCloskey noted that Metro entrance at the former Woodward & Lothrop site was going to be opened in mid-December. This will enable him to give accurate information to his constituents and provide a record in the event committee members are asked about a specific date or project.

Mr. Schwarzbart noted that, in many cases, the information given is just an approximation; the dates change frequently. He noted that the opening of the Commuter Store presented such an example. There are usually imprecise dates in connection with most projects that come under discussion.

Mr. Schwarzbart stated that earlier he had announced that the Village of Friendship Heights would be repaving all of its sidewalks and streets to promote greater pedestrian and vehicular safety and to maintain the area. The work is expected to be completed in December, provided the weather is not a factor. **Mr. Schwarzbart** regrets any inconvenience caused by the construction, but it is necessary.

Mr. Schwarzbart noted, with thanks to **Dr. Kay Greene**, a Village resident who serves on the Village Advisory Committee, that the County restored nine street lamps on Willard Avenue on the three blocks that had been down between Wisconsin and North Park Avenue. There had been two reported robberies in that area, so restoring lighting has made a major contribution to overall safety.

Mr. Schwarzbart stated that members of the Friendship Heights Village Council and Village Manager **Julian Mansfield** met with **Capt. Russell Hamill**, the Second District Commander, to discuss obtaining a greater police presence in the area to manage the larger numbers of people drawn by the new facilities. Unfortunately, the County does not have the resources at present, except to provide some increased coverage during the holiday season.

Item 4 – Steve Petrucci canceled his appearance due to a death in the family. He will re-schedule.

Item 5 – Follow-up Discussion of Wisconsin Place: **Mr. Schwarzbart** stated that during the last meeting, **April Birnbaum** had agreed to check the availability of passenger drop-offs at Wisconsin Place, away from Wisconsin Avenue. Wisconsin Place will no longer have the advantage of the circular driveway in front of Hecht's. **Ms. Birnbaum** was also going to check the signage directing Wisconsin Place customers to Metro.

Ms. Birnbaum introduced **Steve Robins**, who briefed the committee on the status of the drop-off. The circle has been eliminated, to be replaced by streetscaping, and there is to be no formal drop-off on Wisconsin, per the final plan approval. There will be an additional dedicated right turn lane, however, which will serve as an informal drop-off point, but with no vehicle standing or waiting – it is meant to be a quick drop-off only. There is a circular drive on Willard Avenue that will serve as a formal drop-off and a taxi queue; there will also be twenty short term parking spaces in the garage, which will also serve for drop-off and pick-up, both for Wisconsin Place and Metro. There is no charge for the first 20 minutes; this prevents people from using the short-term spaces unnecessarily.

Mr. Schwarzbart noted that the circular driveway on Willard would accommodate two taxis, and asked if this would block normal traffic in and out. **Mr. Robins** stated that there is room for both traffic to circulate with the cabs standing in the circle.

Mr. Schwarzbart asked what kind of signage would be available. **Mr. Robins** stated there would be way finding signs throughout the project, specifically directions to Metro.

Leonard Grant asked if there were plans to put a bus stop back on that side of Wisconsin Avenue, even with the dedicated right turn lane. Mr. Robins stated there was going to be a stop farther north on Wisconsin. **Mr. Grant**

noted that with the heavy traffic traveling south on Wisconsin in the mornings, the combination of buses and drop-offs in the right lane could produce problems.

Mr. Robins answered that making a right turn onto Western is not going to be the predominant movement in the mornings, so should not be a big problem. The predominant movement is to go straight into the District. **Mr. Robins** agreed that there will be some cars turning right. Although the developer was not the key decision maker in the original plan for a dedicated turn lane, it does present some advantages over a combined through-right lane.

Mr. Schwarzbart noted that the best accommodation for drop-offs would be the twenty spaces in the garage; there should be plenty of way finding signs on the development indicating such.

Mr. Robins agreed that proper signage will be important; also just familiarity with Wisconsin Place among returning customers will probably be adequate introduction to the site.

Mr. McCloskey asked when the Wisconsin Place Metro entrance was going to re-open. **Mr. Robins** stated it would open closely in conjunction with the office building, which was scheduled for spring.

Mr. Grant asked if there was a connection between the garage, the new residential building and the Metro. **Mr. Robins** stated one could walk through the garage to get to Metro, or come up the Plaza Level and walk straight to the Metro. **Mr. Robins** added that the Wisconsin Place development took a site that was largely 'impenetrable' and made it accessible from a variety of different points.

Sande Brecher said she had received an email from **Bill McCloskey**, reflecting a concern from a constituent about the aesthetic appearance of the newly installed Metro canopy – it appeared somewhat out of place and not in keeping with the overall architecture of the project. **Mr. Robins** answered that Metro used its standard canopy, and Wisconsin Place worked with WMATA to make it as small as possible, consistent with its purpose; each canopy is built specifically for each site. **Mr. McCloskey** added that he did not think that something like this was in the committee's purview, but that he would follow up on it and get back to his constituent.

Item 6 – Certificates of Appreciation: Leslie Olson, Chevy Chase Land Company, and Carlean Russell, Saks Fifth Avenue, will each receive a Certificate of Appreciation from County Executive Isiah Leggett for their contributions to the TMD Advisory Committee. **Ms. Brecher** stated that the County very much appreciates the time and energy that people put into their time on the committee.

Ms. Olson introduced **Tiffany Gee**, who will be nominated to replace her on the committee.

Item 7 – Maryland Municipal League: Jeffrey Slavin explained that MML is an association that represents municipal governments throughout the state of Maryland. MML works to strengthen the role and capacity of municipal government through research, legislation, technical assistance, training and the dissemination of information for its members.

Mr. Slavin said there is a bill coming up that may be of interest to the committee. **Sen. Rob Garagiola-District 15**, introduced a bill that would allow municipalities without police forces to use speed radar guns. At present, only municipalities with a police force can use radar guns, which do not include Friendship Heights Village or the Town of Somerset. There will be a hearing December 11 in the Executive Office Building in Rockville for those who are interested.

Mr. Slavin added that it is important to maintain a relationship with the State Delegation, and two of the District 15 members that represent constituencies of the TMD Advisory Committee are **William Fritt**, former Chair of the County Pedestrian Safety Coordination Committee; and **William Bronrott**, a leading advocate for pedestrian safety issues. **Mr. Carlson** added that both **Mr. Fritt** and **Mr. Bronrott** have attended TMD Advisory Committee meetings to discuss pedestrian safety matters.

Item 8 – Elimination of South Bound Wisconsin Ave. Bus Stop: **Barbara Tauben** discussed her proposal to permanently remove the planned re-installation of currently closed Metrobus stop on southbound Wisconsin Avenue, between Western and Willard, in front of the former Hecht's site (materials included in meeting packet). The Friendship Heights Village Civic Association, which initiated the proposal, believes elimination of the bus stop will benefit motorists and enhance pedestrian safety permanently:

- 1) It would reduce the potential bus / pedestrian conflicts for pedestrians crossing Wisconsin (east & west) from Willard Avenue;
- 2) It would prevent buses from blocking Willard Avenue traffic;
- 3) It would mitigate southbound Wisconsin Ave. traffic congestion; and
- 4) It would prevent the need for abrupt lane changes, allowing buses to move directly into the southbound travel lane of Wisconsin after making the turn from the Wisconsin Circle station. An additional benefit of this would be improved schedule efficiency.

The Civic Association has shared the proposal with other organizations in addition to the TMD and is seeking to build a community consensus for elimination of the stop before moving forward with an official request to WMATA.

Ms. Tauben illustrated the current bus path if the planned stop is re-instated while committee members viewed maps and other handouts. The current plan is to replace the stop and also to move it 112 ft to the north from its former location on the west side of Wisconsin Avenue. This places it roughly between the Wisconsin Place office building and the Jacques Dessange Salon, much closer to the corner of Willard Avenue with a greater potential for buses to disrupt traffic and pedestrian movement.

Buses turning south from Wisconsin Circle would have to stop almost immediately at the corner of Willard to pick up passengers; if two buses come at same time, which happens frequently, then there is the potential to tie up the intersection during a traffic signal change by blocking southbound Wisconsin traffic and right turning Willard traffic. Once a bus has made a pick up, it must contend with traffic to immediately get into a center or left lane to travel southbound on Wisconsin.

For pedestrians crossing east and west on Wisconsin, there is the current hazard of buses turning left from Wisconsin Circle to travel on southbound Wisconsin Avenue. Adding the need for a quick lane change adds to the potential hazard.

Dr. Alfred Muller, former TMD Committee member, stated the community had been striving for many years to find a balance between pedestrian and traffic movement needs. **Dr. Muller** stressed that in any discussion the need for pedestrian safety should outweigh the needs of traffic.

Dr. Muller added that with the completion of the Wisconsin Place project – with a new office building, retail and residential buildings – there were going to be more pedestrians wanting to cross Wisconsin to get to the bus station. Therefore, a compromise would be to keep the southbound bus stop but put it in its previous location, farther south of Willard Avenue. It makes sense to have a bus stop at this location to cut down on the number of pedestrians who will be crossing Wisconsin to get to the bus station – staying on the west side of Wisconsin is a safer alternative.

Leslie Olson stated it was unfortunate that WMATA representatives could not attend the meeting, as their input about the possible closure of the stop would be important. **Ms. Olson** added that pedestrians from Wisconsin Place will be able to cross underground to get to the station, so the impact of not reopening the stop may not be as severe as expected. **Ms. Olson** stated she supports keeping the stop closed, with the understanding that at some future time there may still be a need to re-open it.

Ms. Tauben stated that currently, it is the 30 series buses that would use the stop (30, 32, 34, 35, 36). **Mr. Schwarzbart** asked in the 'N' buses (N2) also used the stop. **Mr. McCloskey** confirmed that the N route also travels on Wisconsin.

William Farley added that many people hurrying to catch a bus will dart across the street, rather than use the underground passage or walk to a corner. It may not be realistic to expect someone who is carrying bags from Whole Foods, who has to catch a bus right away, to take the time to cross underground and go up an escalator, or to walk to a corner to cross the street.

Mr. Schwarzbart stated that there are some who will take the time to cross properly and those who never will, and some who never may be older people. This will have to be factored in to any solution. The fact that they can go underground doesn't mean they always will.

Mr. Robins added also that the median on Wisconsin Avenue that is being built by the County is designed to discourage crossing at that point. There will be tree planters and other impediments to improperly crossing.

Robert Gonzales (MC Dept. of General Services) addressed that design issue at the last meeting.

Mr. Schwarzbart noted that discussion of the issue may be premature until Wisconsin Place is completed and the traffic patterns can be more objectively analyzed. It is unfortunate that the people from WMATA could not be here today, as there are some questions that the Committee could have asked them, particularly regarding numbers of buses, specific bus routes, etc. Before the Committee takes a position on this, Mr. Schwarzbart would like to know what the ridership patterns will be after Wisconsin Place becomes operational.

Ms. Tauben noted that the way in which people can access transit have been described by crosswalks at Western and Willard, in addition to the underground passage. As a reminder to the Committee, SHA is eventually going to install countdowns and accessible signals at that intersection. This should be done sometime in 2009, and will help pedestrians greatly. The only problem with measuring usage to determine the appropriateness of eliminating the bus stop would be the necessity to restore the bus stop, and generally speaking, once something is restored, it becomes much harder to remove it later.

Mr. Schwarzbart believes that the matter of particular concern is pedestrian safety. If there were a larger number of people coming from the west side of Wisconsin Avenue, many of them necessarily having to cross the street, then you open the door to certain risks to pedestrians which may justify restoring the bus stop. Most of the buses we have been discussing are the ones currently in the terminal that turn left on Wisconsin to go South toward the District.

Mr. Schwarzbart asked **Mr. Carlson** about the correspondence sent to Summon Cannon regarding the bus shelter at Western and River. Mr. Carlson said that we have not yet received a response. **Mr. McCloskey** believes that the Committee should think about pursuing a legal avenue or former ADA complaint with the counsel of a County Attorney to ensure that WMATA does not continue to ignore this committee. The original correspondence was sent on October 30. **Ms. Brecher** responded that before any of this can proceed, the County needs to know first if it is compliant, and exactly what would need to be done. **Mr. McCloskey** just wants WMATA to tell us if it is compliant. Because of earlier emails, he was under the impression that WMATA believes it is not compliant, and he is surprised that they have not taken any action.

Mr. Carlson suggested that instead of the compliance route, perhaps seeing that things are in motion may be a good place to start. He believes that the issue is just that we have not heard from them, while there may be bureaucratic delays somewhere within Metro that we are currently unaware of. Along the same lines, **Mr. Schwarzbart** suggested that we contact **Kevin Newman** rather than get caught up in the formalities.

Bill McCloskey passed on a request from **Bob Cope** that the committee members look at three items that may enhance pedestrian safety:

- 1) Suggestion for crosswalks and striping at the Geico entrance on Western Avenue;
- 2) Change the lane patterns at Jennifer and Western (next to Lord and Taylor) to allow a combined straight and right turn lane on Jennifer. Currently, the right lane is a turn-only lane that forces drivers into the left lane – this hangs up traffic whenever there is a left turn. Very few cars make the right turn. More cars will be able to proceed through the intersection by staying in the right lane.

3) Activation of pedestrian lights at Friendship and Willard.

The Committee voted to send a letter to the District of Columbia for a study of the Jennifer lanes. Eleven members voted yes. The crosswalk striping will also be handled by letter, but the appropriate contact(s) will need to be identified.

Mr. Carlson will look into getting the signals uncovered – this will be handled internally at DOT.

Other votes and Committee action:

Mallory Starr nominated for Vice Chair to replace outgoing Vice Chair **Leslie Olson**:

- Eleven “Aye” votes, no dissent.

Make member contact information available to all TMD voting members:

- Eleven “Aye” votes, no dissent

Meeting adjourned at 10:10 AM

Next meeting date: January 13, 2009